Philosophy and (Christian) Wisdom

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Philosophy as Love of Wisdom and Its Relevance to the Global Crisis of Meaning

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Philosophy and (Christian) Wisdom

Peter Jonkers

Introduction

Many authors have noted that wisdom is making a comeback, after being associated for a long time with old people, tradition, and conservative caution in a culture of youth, modernization, innovation, and risky exploration. The revival of wisdom is especially evident in areas where knowledge and (technical) knowhow come up against questions of ethics, values, beauty, the shaping and flourishing of the whole person, the common good, and long-term perspectives.[1] As will become clear throughout this paper, the resurgence of wisdom can be explained as a reaction against the negative effects of the dominance of scientific rationality, which boasts of its objectivity and its independence from ethical and existential considerations. Many people ask themselves "how the modern world can retrieve a wisdom, i.e. a knowledge, a conscience that is not only based on objects of knowledge, but relies also on life itself as it is lived daily, on a way of living and existing?"[2]

From a broader, historical and cross-cultural perspective, the unilateral focus on scientific rationality in the West is rather exceptional. Religious and secular traditions around the world, from Hinduism over the mythologies of ancient Egypt and Greece to those of Northern Europe, from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, over Zoroastrianism to Judaism and Christianity, abound with revelations of wisdom. These traditions have permeated the history of humankind with stories and legends about and sayings of wise men and women. This becomes e.g. apparent from the eight "immortals" in ancient China, the seven sages of Greece and Rome, the wise men from the East who came to adore the child Jesus,[3] the rishis of India, and the five Sufi sages in the Islam. Finally, and on a more implicit level, there is a lot of wisdom

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[1] David Ford, *Christian Wisdom. Desiring God and Learning in Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

[2] Pierre Hadot, "La figure du sage dans l'Antiquité gréco-latine," in Idem, *Discours et mode de vie philosophique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014), p. 176.

[3] For Barton, the adoration of Jesus by the magi is a paradigmatic story of the quest of the nations for wisdom and of the revelation of true wisdom in a place, where no-one expected it. See: Stephen C. Barton, "Gospel Wisdom," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? Wisdom in the Bible, the Church and the Contemporary World,* ed. Stephen C. Barton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 95.

present in the literature of all cultures of the world.[4] In our days too, people are often taking the advice of wise people and words of traditional wisdom to heart when making difficult existential decisions or simply in giving orientation to their lives.

These examples show that, in all cultures around the world, wisdom is bound up with bodies of tradition, which are preserved, adapted and passed on by wise people to the new generations. In sum, wisdom strikes us as an extraordinary kind of knowledge, resting on human experience, but also having a divine origin. Moreover, wisdom is not a purely theoretical affair, but rather a spiritual way of life, consisting in a combination of theoretical insight in divine, i.e. eternal and unchangeable truths (the Greek word "theoria" means "beholding the divine"), and practical and political knowhow. This way of life is the object of an education in a school of wisdom by a master, whom the pupils see as the transcendent norm of this way of life.[5]

When we focus on the development of wisdom in ancient Greek philosophy, it turns out that the introduction of the word "philosophy," in the fourth century BC, meant a decisive turn in the understanding of the sage, and brought about a deep suspicion against all pretended incarnations of wisdom in the sage. In particular, people became aware of the superhuman character of true wisdom, and the immense distance that separates their ordinary wisdom from divine wisdom.[6] Plato makes a sharp distinction between the perfect knowledge of the Gods, who possess true wisdom, and humans, who can only strive for wisdom.[7] One of the consequences of this evolution was that wisdom came to be identified more and more with *"epistèmè,"* i.e. with a certain and rigorous knowledge of eternal and unchangeable things, which comes closest to divine knowledge. For Aristotle, ideal wisdom consists of a perfect knowhow based on total and certain knowledge, not only of the things themselves, but also of their causes and principles.[8] By contrast, ordinary wisdom, which is compatible with human nature and crucial for daily life, is a practical knowhow of things that are by nature contingent and changeable. In between these two kinds of wisdom we see the emergence of philosophy, which is the essentially *human* exercise to attain *divine* wisdom.[9]

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[4] For a broad, cross-cultural, historical overview of wisdom see Trevor Curnow, *Wisdom. A History* (London: Reaktion Books, 2015).

[5] Hadot, "La figure du sage," pp. 177f. See also Idem, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995), p. 334.

[6] Hadot, "La figure du sage," p. 178f.

[7] Plato, *Symposium* 204a f.; Idem, *Phaedrus* 278d.

[8] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I 1, 981b 29.

[9] Hadot, "La figure du sage," p. 179.

Given the intermediate position of philosophy, the task of the philosopher consists in the exercise, during her whole life, to become wise herself and to describe, in a philosophical discourse, the ideal sage. This description constitutes the object of numerous treatises, and is the theme of oral practical exercises, aimed at training pupils of wisdom in the different philosophical schools.[10] Aristotle gives an excellent example of what a truly philosophical way of life is: by leading a life of wisdom, the human fulfils her condition in the most superb way, while at the same time realizing that wisdom is, because of its divine nature, beyond the human condition.[11] Since the most superb objects are eternal and unchangeable, it is no wonder that, for Aristotle, the highest form of wisdom consists in leading a contemplative life. Yet, this example also shows that wisdom confronts humans with a paradox: "Wisdom corresponds with what is the most essential to man, namely living according to reason and spirit, and at the same time it strikes him as strange and superhuman."[12] A final important characteristic of leading a philosophical life is that practical exercises in wisdom are not something *added* to the philosophical praxis, complementing an abstract theory or discourse, but a philosophical life as such has to be conceived as a spiritual exercise. These exercises can be defined as "a voluntary, personal praxis, meant to realize a transformation of the individual, a transformation of the self."[13] This shows that the final aim of these exercises and, hence, of the schools of wisdom, is not so much to *inform* the disciples about philosophical theories and insights, but to *(trans)form* their lives, that is to educate them.

These characteristics connect the schools of ancient philosophy with most religious and secular wisdom-traditions. Their ultimate goal is not so much to present a philosophical theory of reality or a religious doctrine about the true nature of the divine, but to teach their disciples a method and to train them practically to orientate themselves in thinking

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[10] *Ibid.*, p. 181.

[11] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* X 7, 1177b 26ff.: "But such a life [of wisdom] would be too high for man; for it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of excellence. If intellect is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. […] We must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything."

[12] Hadot, "La figure du sage," p. 186.

[13] Pierre Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre. Entretiens avec Jeannie Carlier et Arnold I. Davidson* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2001), p. 144. See also: Idem, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, pp. 276ff.

as well as in acting. Hence, the link between ancient philosophy and other wisdom traditions is that both are exercises in spiritual ways of life.[14]

In this paper, I want to draw the attention to an important aspect of these spiritual exercises, namely that they educate people in *practical* wisdom. The reason for this choice is that practical wisdom specifically deals with contingent human affairs, so that it can be expected to contribute to finding a solution to the current crisis of meaning. Furthermore, the focus of this paper will be on two very influential wisdom traditions or schools of wisdom, namely Aristotle's philosophy and Christian faith. In the next section, I will examine the nature of practical wisdom as developed by Aristotle. In particular, the question will be how practical wisdom succeeds in establishing a relation between universal principles and particular situations, and why this relation is inevitably fragile. Next, the role and importance of practical wisdom in Christian faith will be shown. The section thereafter critically analyses the fate of wisdom in modernity. The final section explores if and how a retrieval of practical wisdom can offer a response to the ongoing loss of substantial meaning, and how Christian faith can contribute to that.

Aristotle's Idea of Prctical Wisdom

Although, as argued above, ancient philosophers do not separate the theoretical aspects of philosophy as a spiritual way of life from the practical ones, some of them distinguish between theoretical and practical wisdom. In particular, Aristotle defines theoretical wisdom, which is its highest expression, as a demonstrative knowledge of the universal and necessary principles of all things, which by definition cannot be otherwise. Practical wisdom, by contrast, is a true and reasoned capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man, and which are, consequentially, contingent.[15] Therefore, in order to qualify as true wisdom and not merely as technical knowhow, practical philosophy has to connect this knowhow with a profound insight in what is truly good for all humans. This shows that wisdom, theoretical as well as practical, is not be identical with an enormous amount of factual knowledge, or that a wise person would be someone who could give all the correct answers to a hypothetical quiz about

[14] For a further exploration of philosophy as a way of life and an analysis of Pierre Hadot's ideas on this topic, see the contribution of Hu Yeping in this volume.

[15] Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I 1, 981b-982b; Idem, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI 3-7, 1139b-1141b.

everything. Rather, wise people are those who can see the bigger picture, whose horizons are broadest, whose vision is clearest, in other words who live in the light.[16]

In the case of practical wisdom, there is a crucial additional aspect: wise people not only have a broad vision, but also are able to relate it in a meaningful way to contingent situations that can be brought about by human action. In other words, practical wisdom is a spiritual exercise, aimed at giving a proper orientation to human acting. This orientation being based on a correct, deliberative assessment of contingent, existential situations. In order to examine this aspect of practical wisdom in more detail I take Martha Nussbaum's book, *The Fragility of Goodness*, as my guide.[17] Aristotle holds that moral or practical wisdom is concerned with the ultimate particular fact, and can therefore never become universal knowledge.[18] Furthermore, the appropriate criterion of correct choice is that the person of practical wisdom is a thoroughly human being, i.e. someone who does not attempt to take up a stand outside of the conditions of human life, but bases her judgment on a long and broad experience of these conditions.[19] This shows that Aristotle assumes the meaningfulness and value of our everyday human lives, and tries to discover an account of our underlying moral commitments that does justice to our moral experience. He does not downplay the importance of the common good and the universal moral rules that follow from it, but recognizes that these rules cannot and should not be conceived as the only standard for moral decision in contingent situations. Rather, universal rules are like the leaden ruler of Lesbian architecture, which was not rigid but could be adapted to the shape of the stone.[20]

Moreover, the values that are constitutive of a good human life are plural and incommensurable, and therefore they cannot be measured univocally, as if morals were a kind of *technè*. There is no single common notion of the good that practical wisdom only needs to apply in order to pass a correct moral judgment in specific situations. Instead, the best human life should be conceived as a life inclusive of a number of different constituents, each being defined apart from each of the others and valued for its own sake; each virtue is defined separately, as something that has value in itself. To put it concretely: "If I should ask of justice and of love whether both are constituent parts of *eudaimonia*

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[16] Curnow, *Wisdom*, p. 10.

[17] Martha Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness. Luck and ethics in Greek tragedy and philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

[18] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI 8, 1142a 23-4.

[19] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 290.

[20] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, V 10, 1137b 29-32.

[…], I surely do not imply […] that we are to hold them up to a single standard, regarding them as productive of some further value. […] Something can be an end in itself and at the same time be a valued constituent in a larger or more inclusive end." To choose a value "for *its own* sake (for the sake of what it itself is) not only does not require, but is actually incompatible with, viewing it as qualitatively commensurable with other valuable items."[21]

All this means that one cannot give a correct orientation to one's own or someone else's actions simply by applying principles alone, since they fail to capture the fine detail of the concrete particular. The particular must be seized in a confrontation with the situation itself, by a faculty that is suited to confront the situation as a complex whole.[22] This faculty is practical wisdom or prudence; its task is to balance the universal rule and the particular situation until one reaches a moment of equilibrium. In order to do this balancing properly, a wealth of practical experience of particular situations is needed,[23] and this cannot be provided by general principles as such. Yet, although their usefulness is limited, these principles too are essential for practical wisdom. As summaries of the wise judgments of others, these principles are guidelines in moral education for the pupils of the schools of philosophy. On a more general level, these rules guide virtuous adults in their approach to the particular, helping them to pick out its salient features. When there is no time to formulate a fully concrete decision, scrutinizing all the features of the case at hand, it is better to follow a good summary rule than to make a hasty and inadequate concrete choice. Furthermore, rules give constancy and stability in situations in which bias and passion might distort judgment. In sum, rules are necessities because we are not always good judges.[24] Finally and most importantly, "the particular case would be surd and unintelligible without the guiding and sorting power of the universal. […] Nor does particular judgment have the kind of rootedness and focus required for goodness of character without a core of commitment to a general conception – albeit one that is continually evolving, ready for surprise,

[21] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p. 297.

[22] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, pp. 300f.

[23] Robert Song, "Wisdom as the End of Morality," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, pp. 300f. This conclusion is in line with Aristotle's definition of moral virtue: "Moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, the mean relative to us, this being determined by a *logos*, the one by which the person of practical wisdom would determine it." See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1106b36-1107a2.

[24] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p.304.

and not rigid. There is in effect a two-way illumination between particular and universal."[25]

The result of the above examination shows in which way practical wisdom is indeed a spiritual exercise in the ancient schools of philosophy, since it aims at giving a proper orientation to human acting on the basis of a correct assessment of particular, contingent situations in the light of general moral principles. This means that the person of practical wisdom is someone who is educated as a thoroughly human being, in particular as someone who realizes that, especially in moral matters, a view from nowhere is impossible. What makes the deliberations of practical wisdom even more complex is that the different virtues do not only not constitute a cohesive whole, but are to a certain extent incommensurable, as the never-ending tension between the virtues of justice and love illustrates. Yet, these virtues are essential because practical wisdom needs them to interpret and orientate human life in particular situations. In sum, the exercises of practical wisdom are meant to educate people in such a way that they are able to find the right balance between the universal rule and the particular situation, and that they realize that this balance is inevitably fragile, always open to reconsideration.

Christian Wisdom[26]

In his book on Christian wisdom, David Ford describes Christianity as "at present the largest global wisdom tradition."[27] Characteristic of Christian wisdom is that it is God-centered, has the whole of creation as its context, is immersed in history and the contemporary world, and is constantly sought afresh with others in a community whose basic trust is that the Spirit will lead them into further truth. Since Christians believe that Jesus is God's only son, he is not only a teacher of Godly wisdom, the title by which he is most frequently addressed and referred to in the New Testament, but also wisdom incarnate, a theological claim regarding Jesus which first appeared within the early history of the transmission and development of the traditions regarding Jesus.[28] This means that Jesus was not just an enlightened "wisdom teacher,"

[25] Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*, p.306.

[26] I developed the question of the nature of (Christian) wisdom in more detail in: Peter Jonkers, "Serving the World Through Wisdom," in *Envisioning Futures for the Catholic Church*, eds. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2018), pp. 73-105.

[27] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 2.

[28] James D.G. Dunn, "Jesus: Teacher of Wisdom or Wisdom Incarnate?," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, pp. 79, 83.

memorable for his subversive parables and startling figures of speech, since such a reconstruction fails to do justice to the messianic, eschatological dimension of Jesus' kingdom proclamation, and overlooks the extent to which the wisdom which Jesus teaches is a hidden heavenly wisdom, not reducible to matters of empirical observation or existential need. Rather Jesus' wisdom points to a transcendental reality discerned only by faith and in the context of obedient discipleship. Christian wisdom is not primarily a matter of existential, let alone technical or empirical knowledge, but has much more to do with mystery and revelation. It is a manifestation of the hidden life of God made known in the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God.[29]

Christian wisdom is primarily gained from reading scripture alert to both its origins, reception, and current interpretations, as well as to contemporary understanding and life. Much of scriptural wisdom is narrative, i.e. lies in the way the story is told, the narrative pattern and detail, the encounters and images, and the key events and statements, as becomes manifest in a paradigmatic way in the book of Job and the stories about Solomon, as well in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The narrative character of scriptural wisdom, and more in general the fact that Christian wisdom has its source in God means that it is inexhaustible and even elusive, and hence can never be fully grasped by a rational interpretation, be it theological or philosophical.[30]

The essentially divine character of Christian wisdom explains why Paul is so critical of its opposite, namely all manifestations of human or worldly wisdom and human's boasting of it as if it were the result of human knowledge alone. Therefore, Paul qualifies all worldly wisdom rather as folly in the eyes of God, thereby marking its incommensurability with Christian wisdom. In Paul's view, Jews nor Greeks will get the answers they seek, since they ask the wrong questions. Only by believing wholeheartedly in the story of Jesus, and accepting that one's whole life is reframed by it, one can become open to the revelation of God's wisdom.[31] Beyond doubt, the fact that true wisdom can only be reached through God as the radical, personal Other and through Jesus as wisdom incarnate, and that wisdom is, eventually,

[29] Barton, "Gospel Wisdom," pp. 108f.

[30] Ford, *Christian Wisdom*, p. 190.

[31] Richard B. Hays, "Wisdom According to Paul," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, pp. 122f. See also: Colin Gunton, "Christ, the Wisdom of God: A Study in Divine and Human Action," in *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, p. 260.

the salvific effect of God's grace distinguish Christian wisdom most explicitly from the ancient schools of philosophy.[32]

Although these differences are essential, there are also some important similarities between Christian wisdom and the wisdom schools of ancient philosophy. Just like these schools, Christian wisdom is primarily a spiritual exercise, aimed at a transformation or, according to the Christian vocabulary, conversion of the self. Furthermore, just like in ancient philosophy, the final goal of Christian wisdom is inevitably elusive, because the faithful are convinced of the immense distance that separates God's true wisdom from the seeming wisdom of the world. In order to overcome this gap to some extent, Christians need spiritual exercises under the guidance of a spiritual master. Finally, Christian wisdom is not primarily a doctrine of the true nature of the divine, but a spiritual way of life that orientates the lives of the faithful, i.e. their thinking as well as acting.

On the basis of the analysis of Aristotle's conception of practical wisdom in previous section, one can ask if and how Christian wisdom educates people to deal with the contingencies and particularities of individual human lives. A case in point in this respect is Catholic social teaching, which manages to relate this aspect of the Christian wisdom tradition to the heterogeneous realities of persons, societies, and political regimes all over the world. The way, in which Catholic social teaching realizes this is by conferring to prudent individuals and groups in society the responsibility to establish a balance between the universal rules of the Christian wisdom tradition and the particular situations in which people live.

In order to show how this approach works, let us take the social encyclical *Deus caritas est* as an example. It states that "the Church's social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church: in the face of ongoing development these guidelines need to be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live."[33] This quotation shows, first, the ambition of the Catholic Church to orientate the contingent lives of contemporary societies on the basis of the universalist principles of solidarity, subsidiarity, and human dignity, which are concretizations of Christian wisdom, in particular, of the Catholic view on the common good. But, second, the Church also recognizes "the autonomy of the

[32] Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, pp. 372f. See also Paul van Tongeren, "Philosophy as a Form of Spirituality," in *Seeing the Seeker. Explorations in the Discipline of Spirituality. A Festschrift for Kees Waaijman*, ed. Hein Blommenstijn a.o. (Leuven/Paris/Dudley: Peeters, 2008), pp. 109-121.

[33] Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, 27.

temporal sphere," and therefore it refrains from imposing these principles directly on modern, by definition pluralist societies. Hence, when it comes to interpreting the contingent sphere of day-to-day politics in the light of the Church's social teaching, and directing political action on the basis of this teaching, the Church relies on the deliberative capacities of (Christian) politicians and members of civil society at large. Their task is to find a balance between the fundamental principles of social teaching and the contingent opportunities and constraints of civil societies, thereby accepting that it will differ from society to society.

The Fate of Wisdom in Modernity

In the previous sections, it has become clear that ancient philosophy and Christian faith, notwithstanding their substantial differences, have served throughout antiquity and a major part of the Middle Ages as schools of wisdom, educating people, through corporeal and above all spiritual exercises, in a specific way of life in pursuit of wisdom. Besides educating people in the contemplation of the highest truths (theoretical wisdom), the aim of these exercises was to train them in practical wisdom, which according to Aristotle comes down to finding again and again the right balance between general rules and contingent, particular situations. In the light of these illustrious and longstanding wisdom traditions it is all the more surprising that (practical) wisdom has lost so much of its respectability and plausibility since the rise of modernity. It is crucial to examine the causes of this development if we want to retrieve the role of wisdom traditions as a response to the global crisis of meaning.

A first, partial explanation of the declining impact of the ancient schools of wisdom has to do with the success of Christianity. "Since the end of antiquity, and with respect to pagan philosophies, Christian revealed theology has replaced philosophy and it has absorbed at the same time ancient philosophical discourse and ancient philosophical life."[34] Christian theology employed philosophical concepts that had been studied throughout antiquity, in particular by Aristotelian and Neoplatonic commentators. These concepts were needed to solve the theological problems that were raised by Christian doctrine, such as the notions of essence and hypostasis (for the doctrine of the Trinity), of nature (for the doctrine of the Incarnation), and of substance (for the doctrine of transubstantiation). As a result of this employment, Christian theology reduced ancient philosophy to its purely theoretical aspect, so

[34] Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre,* p. 181. See also Idem, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?,* pp. 379f.

that it gradually lost its character as a spiritual way of life. Instead, Christian faith became the only one and true philosophy, and adopted the existential aspects of ancient philosophy. In other words, Christian faith became a spiritual, more specifically ascetic and mystic way of life, thereby recapturing a Christianized version of the spiritual exercises and certain mystical themes of ancient philosophy.[35]

However, the above does not account for the fact that, in the course of the middle ages, Christian theology too became more and more a theoretical affair, and lost contact with practical wisdom. For a concrete example of this development, one only has to compare the existential and autobiographical character of many of Augustine's writings, especially his *Confessiones,* with the theoretical, academic character of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologiae.* Important factors that contributed to turning theology into a theoretical discipline were the foundation of the universities from the late eleventh century onward and the introduction of (translations of the works of) Aristotle in Western Europe, a century later. In the academic philosophical curriculum, which had to be completed before entering the faculty of theology, students familiarized themselves with philosophical concepts that served as instruments for the theoretical clarification of Christian doctrine, mostly through studying commentaries on Aristotle's works. This scholastic method of teaching philosophy, which had already separated philosophical discourse from philosophy as a way of life,[36] had a similar effect on the nature of theology and the way in which it was taught. In sum, this evolution turned not only philosophy, but also theology into a primarily theoretical discipline. Because a (neo-)scholastic kind theology remained predominant till mid twentieth century, and had a special status in many faculties of philosophy and theology, [37] the theoretical, c.q. doctrinal character of these disciplines was strengthened

[35] Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?,* pp. 382f. According to Hadot, the Christianized spiritual exercises have been adopted by the monasteries, and partly by the laity; examples are the examination of conscience, the meditation of death (*memento mori*), the exercises to imagine hell etc. See Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre,* p. 182.

[36] Hadot notes that, in the medieval *facultas artium,* philosophy continued to enjoy a relative autonomy, which led some philosophers to rediscover, through their commentaries on Aristotle, the idea of philosophy as a spiritual way of life, independent from theology. However, these ideas were not well received by the theologians and the ecclesiastical authorities, since they opened the possibility that humans could become blissful through a purely philosophical contemplation. See Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre,* p. 183.

[37] Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?,* p. 388.

and solidified further. In general, this situation led to an ever stronger emphasis on the doctrinal aspects of Christian faith as such.[38]

Yet it has to be noted that the idea of philosophy as a spiritual way of life was not lost completely in modernity, but continued to be practiced, although this was done by philosophers who did not have a formal position at a university, and often as a reaction against academic philosophy. One can think of Petrarch, who refused to call the professors at the university philosophers, and reserved this name for those who authenticated their teaching with their deeds. Other notable examples of people who continued to do philosophy as a way of life were Erasmus, Montaigne, and Spinoza,[39] and in the twentieth century Heidegger and Wittgenstein.[40] In the context of this paper, I especially want to draw the attention to the philosophy of Descartes. The simple fact that he gave his most important philosophical work the title *Meditationes*, well aware of the fact that it referred to the illustrious examples of ancient and Christian spirituality, shows that he considered philosophy not as a purely theoretical, academic discipline, but as a spiritual exercise. Moreover, the direct and personal way in which Descartes addresses his readers shows that he wanted them to engage in the spiritual exercise he was undertaking. Let me, by way of illustration, quote the first sentence of the third meditation:

> I will now shut my eyes, block my ears, cut off all my senses. I will regard all my mental images of bodily things as empty, false and worthless (if I could, I would clear them out of my mind altogether). I will get into conversation with myself, examine myself more

[38] See Peter Jonkers, "From Rational Doctrine to Christian Wisdom," in *A Catholic Minority Church in a World of Seekers*, ed. Staf Hellemans and Peter Jonkers (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2015), pp. 168-172.

[39] Hadot, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, pp. 394ff.

[40] Even Hegel, who was the strongest protagonist of the systematic character of philosophy in the history of Western thinking, explicitly defines philosophy as a way of life in one of his (early) course manuscripts: "As regards the general need for philosophy, we try to clarify this need in the form of an answer to the question, which relationship has philosophy to life? This question is identical with the question: to what extent is philosophy practical? Since the true need for philosophy comes eventually down to that one learns to live from it and through it." See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 5: Schriften und Entwürfe (1799-1808)* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1998), p. 261.

> deeply, and try in this way gradually to know myself more intimately.[41]

In a similar vein, Descartes' letters to princes Elisabeth of Sweden are exemplars of spiritual guidance. Yet, on the other hand, Descartes rejected all ancient and medieval schools of wisdom, and wanted to start "from scratch" with his philosophical explorations. In his *Discours de la méthode* he is very explicit about this: he likens

> the moral writings of the ancient pagans […] to very proud and magnificent palaces built only on sand and mud. They praise the virtues, making them appear more admirable than anything else in the world; but they don't adequately explain how to tell when something *is* a virtue, and often what they call by this fine name 'virtue' is merely an instance of callousness, or vanity, or despair—or parricide![42]

This takes us to a final and perhaps most decisive factor that determined the fate of philosophy as a pursuit of wisdom in the course of modern philosophy, an evolution that I propose to label as "the scientification of wisdom." Again, the philosophy of Descartes is paradigmatic in this respect. The wider context of above quote from the *Discours de la méthode* shows that Descartes not only wanted to start philosophy from scratch and on his own, but also that his aim was to found it once and for all on a solid, unshakeable basis, this in contrast to the sandy and muddy foundations on which the ancient schools of philosophy rested. In other words, Descartes wanted to get rid of the contingency and fragility, which characterize practical wisdom, and replace it by a new kind of wisdom that is the product of robust, scientific knowledge, founded on the mathematical method. Hence, he takes the fundamental decision, with far-reaching consequences, to expand the mathematical method to all other disciplines (an approach called "mathesis universalis"). This leads to a radical redefinition of philosophy as scientific in the strictest sense of the word. Because is rests on an indubitable and absolutely clear foundation, philosophy is able to produce a knowledge that has the same degree of certitude and

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[41] René Descartes**Error! Bookmark not defined.**, *Oeuvres de Descartes [Edition Adam et Tannery]. Tome VII: Meditationes de prima philosophia* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), p. 34.

[42] René Descartes**Error! Bookmark not defined.**, *Oeuvres de Descartes [Edition Adam et Tannery]. Tome VI: Discours de la méthode* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), p. 8.

clarity as mathematics. Hence, it can serve as the groundwork of all (other) sciences.

For the fate of wisdom in modernity it is vital to note that Descartes redefines the word wisdom and identifies it with scientific knowledge.

> By wisdom is to be understood not merely prudence in the management of affairs [which was the habitual definition of practical wisdom], but a perfect knowledge of all that man can know, as well for the conduct of his life as for the preservation of his health and the discovery of all the arts, and that knowledge to serve these ends must necessarily be deduced from first causes.[43]

Therefore, if one wants to reach the highest degree of wisdom, one needs, first of all, a perfect knowledge of all things, and this can only be obtained if one starts from the principles, taking into consideration that they "are very clear, and […] that we can deduce all other truths from them." [44] This shows how the Cartesian method of the mathesis universalis has affected the very nature of philosophy, including practical wisdom. Descartes compares his new, strictly deductive idea of philosophy with

> a tree, of which metaphysics is the root, physics the trunk, and all the other sciences the branches that grow out of this trunk, which are reduced to three principal, namely, medicine, mechanics, and ethics. By the science of morals, I understand the highest and most perfect which, presupposing an entire knowledge of the other sciences, is the last degree of wisdom.[45]

The above shows that Descartes follows the line of thought, defined by Aristotle and followed by Thomas Aquinas and other medieval philosophers and theologians, according to which theoretical philosophy, in particular the scientific knowledge of the first causes and principles of things, is the highest form of wisdom. Yet, at the same time, Descartes distinguishes himself from Aristotle, because he rejects the distinction between theoretical and practical wisdom, and reduces the latter to the former. Descartes' comparison of the whole of philosophy with a tree shows that practical wisdom has indeed become a derivative of scientific knowledge. The implication of this reduction is that a crucial aspect of the Aristotelian idea of practical wisdom, namely to find a balance

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[43] René Descartes, *Oeuvres de Descartes [Edition Adam et Tannery]. Tome IX/2: Principes de la philosophie* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), p. 2.

[44] Descartes, *Principes de la philosophie,* p .9.

[45] Descartes, *Principes de la philosophie,* p. 14.

between universal rules and contingent, particular actions, and the acknowledgement of the inevitable fragility of practical wisdom fades away. Descartes is convinced that the certainty and univocity that characterize the mathesis universalis also count for the whole of reality, so that, eventually, there is no contingency anymore. This means that practical wisdom is meant to be elevated to the rank of scientific knowledge. In Descartes' view, this results eventually in a so-called definitive science of morals, which consists in a direct and univocal application of a limited number of absolutely clear and indubitable scientific principles to all particular existential situations, basically in the same way as the laws of motion apply to the interaction of all physical objects.

The Cartesian program to reduce practical wisdom to scientific knowledge remained paradigmatic in the course of the history of modern philosophy. Prominent examples in this respect are Leibniz' definition of wisdom as "a perfect science of all those things that are in the reach of the human heart,"[46] Fichte's project to replace philosophy as the love of wisdom by the doctrine of science,[47] and Hegel's programmatic statement that "to help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title "love of knowing" and be actual knowing […] is what I have set myself to do."[48] In twentieth century philosophy one can refer to the project of the Vienna Circle to develop a "scientific worldview".

The practical translation of this paradigm was scientism, which was a dominant trend in Western societies during the end of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century, and which continues to be quite influential in our times. Scientism's central claim is that scientific rationality is able to solve all moral and existential questions of humankind in an objective, scientific way, from how to define and evaluate social progress to offering a solution to the more fundamental problems of human freedom and destiny. This shows that scientism styles itself as the definitive instantiation of practical wisdom on a purely scientific basis, claiming to be able to answer all the questions of substantial meaning. However, in the course of the twentieth century, it became more and more evident that scientism failed to live up to its

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[46] Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, "Von Glückseligkeit," in: Idem, *Philosophische Schriften, Band VI:3* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1980), pp. 645f. It deserves to be noted that, in this text, Leibniz refers approvingly to Descartes' comparison of wisdom with the fruits of the tree of philosophy.

[47] Johann Gottlieb Fichte, "Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie," in Idem, *Werke, Band 1: Zur theoretischen Philosophie I* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), pp. 38f.

[48] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Schriften. Band 9: Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1980), p. 11.

expectations.[49] Its claims turned out to be overly optimistic because of the enormous complexity of all major societal and existential questions, such as how to solve the ecological crisis in a fair way, how to divide wealth justly, how to prevent mass-killings, how to evaluate the practical implications of fundamental existential notions like freedom, respect, solidarity, love etc. Moreover, scientific and technological developments have confronted people with a lot of new existential problems, which cannot be solved in a purely scientific way, as the intricate moral questions about the beginning and end of human life show. Finally, scientism's redefinition of all kinds of existential problems in a so-called objective and scientific way turned out to be disruptive for the life-world, which is precisely the domain where the need for practical wisdom is most acute.[50] In sum, scientism's claim to serve as the definitive answer to all questions of substantial meaning turned out to be not only unfeasible, but also fundamentally wrongheaded.

Practical Wisdom as a Response to the Loss of Substantial Meaning

After the disillusion about the promises of scientism, the fundamental question crops up whether a retrieval of wisdom traditions can be a response to the above problems. In order to introduce this response it is first of all necessary to examine the nature of the loss of substantial meaning more closely. It comes as no surprise that this loss is the flipside of the success of scientism, in particular of the fact that scientism has led to a marginalization of all wisdom traditions, reducing them to contingent opinions because of their non-scientific character.[51] Important factors that have contributed to the loss of substantial meaning in our times are the processes of "bricolage" and consumerism. The term bricolage refers to the fact that the life-styles of many people are the

[49] Jürgen Habermas, *Glauben und Wissen. Friedenspreis des deutschen Buchhandels 2001* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 16ff.

[50] See Peter Jonkers, "A Revaluation of Wisdom to Reconnect Philosophy with the Life-world," in *Philosophy and the Life World*, eds. He Xirong, Peter Jonkers, and Shi Yongze (Washington DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2017), pp. 49-51.

[51] See Peter Jonkers, "Contingent Religions, Contingent Truths? A Philosophical Analysis of the Role of Existential Truth in Religious Ways of Life," in *Religions Challenged by Contingency. Theological and Philosophical Perspectives to the Problem of Contingency*, eds. Dirk Martin Grube and Peter Jonkers (Brill: Leiden, 2008), pp.167-170; Peter Jonkers, "Religious Truth in a Globalizing World: New Challenges to Philosophy of Religion," in *Religion and Politics in the New Century: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives*, eds. Ph. Quadrio and C. Besseling (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009), pp. 189-197.

result of tinkering, of fitting elements of various wisdom-traditions into an individual religious patchwork. Whether or not this bricolage is successful only depends on one's subjective preferences, on whether one feels good with them. The term consumerism is used to refer to the fact that many people's attitude towards wisdom traditions is similar to that of consumers in a supermarket: in the enormous shopping-mall of today's globalized culture, they pick and choose what meets best their personal needs. Obviously, all these life-style products try to seduce the consumer into buying. The result is a generalized eclecticism, in which people not only have lost contact with traditional schools of wisdom and the substantial meanings that they foster, but also are reluctant to let themselves influence by these schools.[52] Instead, they are constantly busy constructing and reconstructing the content and meaning of their lives, gaining information about whether there is anything attractive in the latest new trends, desperately hoping to get likes" from their peers for their lifestyle, and always afraid of being out of vogue.

Although most people welcome these developments, the loss of substantial meaning confronts them from time to time with the feeling of being uprooted, of living in a fragmented and continuously changing world void of stable orientation-points. In other words, many people in our times have a strong, but indefinite longing without substantial belonging. They express this by using keywords like *conversion* and *pilgrimage* to characterise their existence. However, in my view, this restlessness only shows that they are caught between their aversion to commit themselves to substantial traditions and their longing for such commitments for the sake of giving orientation to their lives.

In order to explain this restlessness further, one can refer to Durkheim, according to whom normative uncertainty is latently present in all modern societies. Individual and societal moral norms are not derived anymore from an eternal divine order or an immutable natural law, but depend on societal recognition. Moreover, the rise of expressive individualism has further strengthened the idea that moral norms are nothing but (social) constructions, thus enhancing their instability. Therefore, it is no surprise that the great variety of norms and values and the speed, with which they are changing cause a dominant experience of normative uncertainty. Another important cause of this experience has to do with the fact that some of the predictions of the modernization theory on moral issues have not come true. This theory predicted the emergence and diffusion of an ethos of individualism and instrumentalism in all modern societies, as well as the rise of a procedural, rational, and universalist ethics, combined with the fading away of all kinds of social discrimination. This would eventually lead to a society, in which cultural

[52] Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre,* p.165.

and religious differences would be irrelevant, so that conflicts over substantial values would belong to a distant past.

However, in contrast to this prediction we see that traditions, religious and secular ones, continue to leave a lasting imprint on the lives of people in all European societies. These traditions are especially important in those domains where modernization has eroded the functional basis of traditional moral rules, without being able to provide plausible new ones, such as the care for the sick and elderly. Another persisting problem of modern societies is that moral rules, which seem at first sight universal and rational, lose their self-evidence when people try to apply these rules in particular moral dilemmas.[53] What has made this problem even worse is the fact that these universal principles tend to become ever more formal (or abstract) and procedural, while the moral decisions that people have to take in particular situations become more and more entangled. Finally and most importantly, even the strongest defenders of liberal, modern democracies have recognized that procedural moral principles lack the motivational potential that people need to act in accordance with these principles.[54] In sum, there is a widening gap between the universal, but formal moral principles of modernity and the substantial values that people need as guidance in their concrete moral behaviour, while at the same time it becomes clear that the former have not been able to replace the latter.

This explains why the question of the crisis of substantial meaning is an acute and topical one. As a response to it, Hadot proposes a revaluation of schools of (practical) wisdom, religious and secular ones; they are a sort of "experimental laboratories," whose results can be very useful to orientate ourselves in life.[55] In my view, the reason for their importance in our times is that these schools not only educate us in discovering and critically examining the principles of practical wisdom and their specific implications in different contexts, but also train us to find the right balance between these principles and the particular situations, in which we have to act. These schools also "employ" so-called masters of wisdom, who are essential in training people to make the transition from book learning to lived wisdom. It goes without saying that Christian faith, just like many other religious and secular

[53] Hermann Dülmer, "Modernization, Culture and Morality in Europe: Universalism, Contextualism or Relativism?," in *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe,* eds. Wil Arts and Loek Halman (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 257.

[54] See e.g. Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in der Öffentlichkeit. Kognitive Voraussetzungen für ‚öffentlichen Vernunftgebrauch' religiöser und säkularer Bürger," in Idem, *Zwischen Naturalismus und Religion. Philosophische Aufsätze* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2005), p. 137.

[55] Hadot, *La philosophie comme manière de vivre,* p. 166.

traditions, is a school of wisdom. Yet, just like was the case in ancient times, the contemporary schools of wisdom have to operate in a competitive field, so that they have to substantiate that the orientation they offer is trustworthy. Only then they will be accepted as contributing to solving the crisis of substantial meaning.

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